7: Marroquin E-5 (1955) 1957 NU31 Seri NU31

Geographical Distribution

The Seri Indians live in two small Indian villages on the coast of the Gulf of California, State of Sonora, Desemboque and Punta Chueca. From there they frequently go to Isla Tiburón in the Gulf of California. 131 [484]

Approximately 35 Seri families live in Desemboque and 16 in Punta Chueca. Only in the first of these two places are there five "yori" (mestizo) families. 162 [563]

Sanitary Problems

The Seris have no defense against certain diseases which, like measles and flu, they acquire in their relations with the "yoris"; these diseases cause many deaths among the Indians. According to the an- 164 731 [751]

[291] [854] [302]

Seri Indian woman of Desemboque, Sonora. *Photo Henriette Yurchenco.*

cient Seri Chico Romero, last Seri Governor, there was a great smallpox epidemic there about 1897 which caused the death of a third of the tribe which was living in Costa Rica, a small ranch on the coast of Sonora.

In 1955 measles appeared among the Seris, with a great number of victims, children and adults; the actions of the rural teacher Leo Sandoval, the Linguistic Eduardo Mosser and of the sanitation authorities of Hermosillo, succeeded in keeping the mortality rate down; nevertheless, the number of deaths reached 5% of the total native population. [165] [744]

124 Seri alike, is acquainted (Cougar, Jaguar, Whale, etc.) questioning had been done by referring to such and such beast without the use of pictures or actual specimens. This procedure had been followed for the majority of mammals, which are well enough known in the area. But otherwise, questioning had been done with actual specimens in hand, alive where possible. This was owing to [825] the fact that response may be different to the dead specimens than to the live ones and grew out of a conviction (entirely substantiated in the course of work) that many animals, of a small variety especially, are recognized more by their distinctive behaviour pattern, flight, selection of habitat, voice, running posture, etc., than by the shape and form alone. All invertebrates, all reptiles and all but the best known and largest fish had produced the data from actual specimens, dead or alive. Finally, where neither common colloquial name nor specimens were available, I resorted to pictures. That way I obtained data for a small number of animals and for a good many birds. This method has its weakness. The line drawings in the excellent guide to the *Birds of Mexico* by Blake I used are somewhat on the "dead" side and may be good aid in bird identification to someone who also will read the text, but they often fail to be of much use to someone who rarely has seen the drawings in any book, let alone a bird guide. From the replies it was obvious that a certain amount of misidentification took place in the naming of the birds or mammals from the sketches. I took account of this and eliminated from consideration all those forms where misidentification on the part of the informant was obvious. This in itself may be a worthwhile object of study but it was not my concern at the moment.

In working with the informants I studiously avoided giving them any suggestion that I already knew what the animal was or that I had a fair idea about the general features of its natural history. This is especially important in considering the Seris' knowledge of the animal distribution, ecology and other salient features. When available, I often brought along specimens of species I knew did not occur in Desemboque which had been captured elsewhere, in the absence of the Seris. This was in order to test better their recognition of animal forms.

115 Altogether 10 informants had been used. Of these the bulk were questioned in 1953, some again in 1955 and that year Chico Romero, now an old man of over 70, had been also added to the roster. Chico was Kroeber's star informant in 1930 and from him came the bulk of Kroeber's original information.

The two main informants were Miguel Barnett, then aged about 45 and one of the Seris' best hunters, and Jose Juan Moreno, a fellow about 25, recognized as their best fisherman. As expected, their preoccupations and interests slanted their replies. Accordingly, Jose Juan had the best knowledge of the marine animals and Miguel of the terrestrial animals. Jose Juan aided me again with some information in 1955.

● [165] Other informants were as follows: Juan Torres, aged 40 or so; Ramon Montayo, one of the

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115 oldest Seris then alive of over 70; Ramon Cor-
[165] rales, claiming to be 37 and on the dim-witted side; Jesus Montanyo, a quiet, cooperative man of 21; Natcheo Molina, aged 35 or so, whose interest in the protestant hymnals was unfortunately far greater than in giving me the information I wanted; Jose Manuel Romero, about 37 years old on his own claim; and Jose Barnett, Miguel's son, aged 14. Inclusion of young Barnett was a lucky
825 strike because it indicated clearly differences in the natural history knowledge between the older men and the young men, later confirmed also in the incidental questioning of several young boys.
[868] Young men start out with general interest in animals of all sorts, including the small invertebrates, but as they grow up they end up with solid knowledge of economically important species and slim, forgotten knowledge of the insignficant invertebrates.

124 I made an endeavor to obtain the same sort of information from several informants in order to eliminate as far as possible aberrant answers or peculiarities. The most solid information is available for the mammals, which are, of course, well-known. Here in some cases the same kind of information had been obtained from five individuals. In other instances only two to three were available and sometimes only one. What was surprising about the information given were not the differences, which I often indicated in the text, but the amount if identical agreement on almost every single item of data between different individuals.

Since it was impossible to obtain information on all animals from the same individuals, the questioning proceeded in "blocks." By this I mean, I would question for example two individuals about the entire order of mammals (every species of them) and another two on the birds. Two other individuals then would be questioned on half of the birds and half of the mammals, while the other two on half of the reptiles and half of the fishes; still another two on half of the insects and half of the marine invertebrates, while others would yet cover all of the insects or reptiles or fishes independently. This I believe is a useful procedure. It allows to test generalized concepts of natural history for several individuals for diverse groups. It is motivated by the question of no little importance. What does so-and-so know about mammals and what does he know about birds?
[825] What are his generalized ideas of each group? It had been soon discovered that when it concerns special points, the informants were apt to have standardized notions of what the animals did, regardless of the actual situation. The less actual observational knowledge they actually had, the more frequent were pat replies. Obvious demonstration of this helped a great deal to eliminate such pat answers or to recognize them for what they were and to account for them in the final analysis.

000 Another point in the procedure is of par-
[P.5A]

*825 ster is really a curious case. The Seris deny that it is venomous or that it bites. Reasons why this really venomous beast is considered harmless by the Seri is probably twofold. First, it is quite rare in their territory; the area of Kino and Desemboque is near the southern-most boundary of its distribution. Second, it is sluggish and slow moving and quite unaggressive, and, as the Seri know it, it probably never has bitten any of them within their memory.

To break them down by the groupings, the toxic species are six species of snakes, four of lizards and the toad, and the non-toxic, all of the turtles, 10 species of lizards and one snake. It is clear then that almost all snakes are considered toxic, although in one instance, the red racer, there seems to be disagreement on the subject. But when the figures are broken down to the fatalities, this pattern disappears. For here, only both rattler, *Xanthusia*, *Coelonyx* and *Crotaphytus* are considered potentially fatal to the Seris, and the sixth, the coral snake, is supposedly fatal to the Mexicans but not to the Seris. There are good grounds for believing that, under certain circumstances, the bite of both rattlers, especially of the diamondback, can be fatal and there are cases on record [165] when a young child (Seri) from Desemboque and a young man were killed by the large rattler—within the past few years (1950-1954). The sidewinder is slightly less feared, no doubt because it is smaller, but they think it does always cause illness. Both rattlers inflict the toxic bite with the two large teeth in the front, where the venom is stored. They both have venom also stored in the head and in the rear section of the body two inches or so from the anus. So, at least, the Seri think; and when they deliver the rattlers to the frying pans, they always are careful to cut off the head and the tail and throw them away. This belief in the location of snakes' venom in the head 171 and the tail, in a variety of species and generally *825 of snakes (whether actually toxic or not), seems widespread in a good many parts of the world in areas where snakes, especially the large ones, make up a favorite dish of the aborigines.[12] Of course, this belief in the location of the venom in the head and tail of the rattlers is also shared by the Mestizos of their area.

*825 The coral snake represents somewhat a special case and is a good indication that many such ideas may owe their origin to the actual observation. This snake is greatly feared by the local Mestizos and is considered by them to be at last as deadly as the ratttlers, if not more. The Seris also think that it is venomous; they believe that it harbors venom in the head and tail and also that it inflicts venom with the fangs. But they also say that it does not bite as readily as the viper and that it is fatal to the Mexicans but not to the Seris. It is not hard to guess that the basis for this difference in the toxicity is the fact that the snake probably never has bitten any of the Indians. But the Seris

[12] I have observed this, by the way, among peoples of Victoria and Duala in the Cameroons—except that the belief there was associated with the large African rock python.

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* 825 to the belief that the spider stings with the rear of the body) may cause death in 2-3 hours. It may [753] also kill chicks and one of the informants, Jose Juan Moreno, claimed to have been paralized by the sting of the Black Widow for eight days . . . . [158] However, Juan is a good hypochondriac, and even when not apt to exaggerate, he may have suffered a genuine trauma owing to an encounter with this spider. While smaller spiders are not considered too dangerous, the *Tarantula* is. It can both bite with its jaws and sting with the rear end of the [753] body and it is said to be more dangerous to children—it may cause their death at times. The adults will weather its attack but will become quite ill. [752] As remedy for its bite, a plant *quivira* is used as a hot extract taken in a small glass for 2-3 days.

Almost all of the animals closely related to the Arachnoids, the scorpion, the Sun spider, *Scolopendra* and the tick, are also venomous in the Seri view. Of these, the scorpion is most feared, and in adults it will cause illness lasting up to a week while to very small children it may be fatal. As a proof the informants mentioned a six months old ● [165] girl recently stung by a scorpion who died in less than six hours—the fact confirmed by the Mexicans in the village. Remedy for this is similar to [752] others—a plant called *amx.xuháy* is drank with hot water for three days, a glass per day.

The Sun spider, also armed supposedly with a sting at its rear, is said to be fatal to horses for whom there is no remedy. This is a pure fiction, [177] but the belief is common among the Mexicans and the Seris certainly took it up from them. But no one suggested that the Sun spiders are in any way harmful to men although they are avoided, just in case.

The *Scolopendra* is considered very dangerous, much like a viper. It bites badly but is not fatal. Actually, the story probably concerns another species, for *Scolopendra malkini* has only recently been described and is rare in Desemboque.

The tick's unpleasant traits had already been discussed under another heading. All that is essen- [753] tial to add is a belief that in addition to other exploits it can enter a person's ear causing much pain and that for this reason it is particularly bad for the children, as there is no remedy.

There remain three more species of various degree of toxicity. Of these, the *Triatoma* is most conspicuous both for its effects and factual observation. This blood sucker bites with its mouth parts [753] and introduces illness called by the Seri *syexhis. ?e . kemep* which may end fatally. People of all sexes and ages are subject to it equally, and the illness may last three months, and there is no

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157 The women are virtuous and faithful and perform all the duties of
152 wife and mother and bear their share of hardships. The hard life,
[145] exposure and struggle for existence soon causes hard features, wrinkles
[165] and ugliness. Many babies die young and the tribe probably numbers
[167] only about two hundred.

123 The dancing by the driftwood fires continued as we turned in to rest, our eyes constantly drawn to the flame and the glittering eyes in the wild dark faces, while the waves of the sea accompanied the chanting in that mysterious isle of Seriland.

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133

Seris - off to the fishing grounds - December 1934. Alcatraz Island in distance.

222 In Seriland most of the food comes from the sea. During April and May, at the time of my first visit, a green grass growing on the sea bottom was detached and washed ashore. The women dragged it up on the bank near camp and spread it out to dry. Some of the stalks contained about seven fine green seeds the size of a pin head. When dry, the
[285] women threshed them out with sticks on a piece of canvas. These are cleaned by the deft use of the *batea*, or winnowing basket, of which these people are pastmasters.

252 A pint of these fine seeds were parched in an olla over coals of
262 driftwood and constantly stirred to prevent burning. It was then ground on a flat rock like a *metate*---any flat rock---into a green meal which was very nourishing. This was cooked in an olla with turtle oil, making a porridge like thick green paint. It was then drunk or eaten with the fingers. If there is plenty, two fingers are used; if not, only one finger.